

"Carrying the Load" Essay from *The Goldfinch*, November 1983

As soon as railway lines began running, express companies quickly switched from stagecoaches to the faster, more reliable railroad cars. With such good transportation available for shipping goods, a new way to buy things developed. Stores in large cities began to sell their goods through a mail-order business. Large picture-filled catalogs became "wish books" for people who did not get to the cities. It was exciting to choose from the many wonderful things in the catalog and receive packages from far away at the nearest railway depot. This new way of shopping created competition for merchants in towns that could not be ignored.

Railroads replaced stagecoaches in another way. The United States Post Office officials decided mail should travel by rail instead of the slower stagecoach. The mail was sorted and sacked at post offices and placed on the railroad for delivery to another point. As the number of letters increased, delays occurred at the sorting centers. To solve this problem, a special car was built for use as a traveling post office. Mail clerks sorted the mail as the train raced through the countryside. The first regular railway post office began on the Chicago & Northwestern road from Chicago to Clinton, Iowa in 1864. The railway postal car system grew rapidly in the West. But even the railway postal cars were eventually replaced. In the 1960s the post office officials decided to use trucks and airplanes to move the mail.